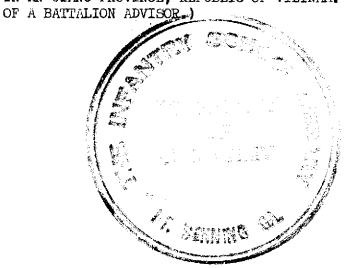
#### UNITED STATES ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL

Fort Benning, Georgia

31 May, 1968

OPERATIONS OF THE 15th REGIMENT, 9th INFANTRY DIVISION (ARVN) IN A REACTION OPERATION FROM 1 DECEMBER 1964 TO 8 DECEMBER 1964 IN AN GIANG PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. ( PERSONAL EXPERIENCE



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Advanced Course IOAC Number 3

Roster No. 71, Advisory Group 12

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OPERATIONS OF THE 15th REGIMENT, 9th INFANTRY DIVISION (ARVN)
IN A REACTION OPERATION FROM 1 DECEMBER 1964 TO 8 DECEMBER 1964
IN AN GIANG PROVINCE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM. (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE
OF A BATTALION ADVISOR.)

#### INTRODUCTION

## 1. The Military Situation in IV Corps in 1964

In 1964, the Viet Cong had made great military and political gains in the rice-rich Mekong Delta which is the southern part of the Republic of Vietnam. The Viet Cong were operating in larger and larger units, and the 7th and 21st Infantry Divisions (ARVN) could not cope with the Viet Cong units in the area. Because the situation was approaching a crisis in the Delta, the Vietnamese High Command shifted the 9th Infantry Division (ARVN) from the relatively quiet II Corps to the more active IV Corps area to help the 7th and 21st Infantry Divisions (see Map "A").

## 2. The 9th Infantry Division Operational Plan

By October 1964, the 9th Division had moved to the Delta and assumed responsibility for an area of operations (see Map "B"). The 9th Division had given priority to operations of the 13th and 14th Regiments in Vinh Binh and Vinh Long Provinces. The 15th Regiment had responsibility for operations in Kien Phong and An Giang Provinces in the western portion of the 9th Division's operational area. Kien Phong Province had the second priority, and An Giang Province had the third priority for operations.

## 3. The Existing Situation

An Giang Province had two minority groups. The Hoa Hao religious sect lived in the eastern portion of the province, and the western portion was inhabited by several thousand

ethnic Cambodians who lived in Vietnam. The Viet Cong effort in the western half of An Giang Province was aimed at pulling the Cambodians away from the government (see Map "C").

To show that the government could not control the area, the 502d Battalion (Viet Cong) entered the province in November 1964 and started military operations against the government. Tinh Bien and Tri Ton Districts were the military targets of the 502d Battalion (VC).

Ba Chuc, a town in Tinh Bien District, was the first town attacked by the battalion. The Viet Cong raided Ba Chuc on the 20th of November 1964 and drove the local militia out of their fort. Following this attack, the 2d Battalion of the 15th Regiment was sent to Ba Chuc, and the village's Popular forces unit returned to their fort. For the next two weeks, the 2d Battalion operated in the vicinity of Ba Chuc, trying to locate the Viet Cong battalion. The 502d Battalion (VC) disappeared for thirteen days.

On 1 December 1964, the 502d Battalion (VC) attacked the government outpost in the village of AM. Tuc. This village was located eleven kilometers southeast of Ba Chuc. The Viet Cong overran the outpost and killed all of the 35 defenders inside the fort. The troops in the outpost were all Cambodians, and all were villagers of An Tuc. From that day, the villagers of An Tuc were staunch supporters of the Vietnamese government.

After the action at An Tuc, the 502d Battalion (VC) climbed the west **Side** of Nui Koto, a 614 meter high mountain to the southeast of An Tuc. Then the unit disappeared again.

#### 4. The Regimental Plan of Operation\*

The 9th Division ordered the 15th Regiment to catch the Viet Cong battalion, drive it off of Nui Koto, and assist the Tri Ton District Chief in re-establishing the outpost at An Tuc. The Regiment would have the 2d Battalion which was already stationed at Ba Chuc, the 1st and 3d Battalions which were located at Cao Lanh, the Headquarters Company and the Reconnaissance Company which were also located at Cao Lanh, the 2d Troop of the 2d Cavalry Squadron, and a battery of four 105mm howitzers. An Giang Province would send the Deputy Province Chief, the 861st and 862d Regional Forces Companies, and an armored car platoon. The regional and popular forces worked under the direct control of the An Giang Deputy Province Chief, but unity of command was achieved by having the deputy work in the command post of the 15th Regiment.

The forces assembled in Tri Ton on the 3d of December 1964, and made plans to attack the Viet Cong. The 1st and 2d Battalions were to circle the base of Nui Koto from two directions. The cavalry troop and the regional forces companies were to help the battalions seal off the base of the mountain. The 3d Battalion was to move across the mountain from northeast to southwest, and drive the Viet Cong off of the mountain. The plan called for two days of operations.

The artillery would support the operation from the town of Tri Ton (see Map "D").

A platoon of scout dogs and a squad of engineers were attached to the 3d Battalion for use on Nui Koto. The engineers carried flamethrowers and explosives for use on the mountain, but they were never used.

#### NARRATION

#### 1. Preliminary Campaign (4 December to 7 December 1964)

The Regiment started the operation at 0500 hours on the 4th of December. All units moved as planned, but the 3d Battalion soon ran into trouble. Viet Cong snipers slowed the 3d Battalion on the slopes of Nui Koto, and the terrain and dense vegetation further impeded the battalion's progress.

Instead of reaching their first objective at 0900 as planned by the regimental commander, the 3d Battalion was delayed for three hours, and reached the objective at noon. The 1st and 2d Battalions reached their final objectives at the same time, but had no contact with the Viet Cong. The 3d Battalion reached the second and final objective of the day at 1700 in the afternoon. The 3d Battalion had lost two men in the day's operation. No other unit had made contact with the Viet Cong.

On 5 December, the operation continued as shown on Map
"E". The 2d Battalion returned to Ba Chuc, the 1st Battalion
and the 2-2 Cav screened the south and east sides of Nui Koto,
and the 3d Battalion moved down the south side of the mountain
in three columns. At 1500 hours on the 5th of December, a
unit of the 502d Battalion (VC) ambushed the center column of
the 3d Battalion and pinned it down in open rice paddies.
The 3d Battalion's Headquarters Company and 3d Company had
been caught in the ambush. Four men were killed in the fight
as the companies covered each other and withdrew to the hamlet
of Phum Thnot. The Regimental Reconnaissance Company and the
2-2 Cav were dispatched by the 15th Regiment to help the am-

bushed companies. The 105mm howitzers in Tri Ton could not fire on the Viet Cong, because the enemy positions were on the steep reverse slope of the mountain. All action stopped at dark with the 2d Battalion in Ba Chuc, the 1st Battalion in the hamlet of Coto, and the rest of the 15th Regiment in the hamlet of Phum Thnot.

The artillery and the province forces were in Tri Ton, and the town was attacked by the Viet Cong during the night. The Viet Cong inflicted only light casualties and damages, and were driven off by daylight.

On the 6th of December, the 3d Battalion and the 2-2 Cav circled the western side of Nui Koto. They exchanged fire with some snipers near the town of An Tuc, but both sides avoided contact. The reconnaissance company and the 1st Battalion circled the eastern side of Nui Koto without any enemy contact (see Map "F"). The 9th Division had given the regiment only two days to find and destroy the Viet Cong. Most of the regiment's forces were to be released on the 7th of December, so all of the units returned to Tri Ton on the evening of the 6th of December.

The 1st Battalion, the 2-2 Cavalry Troop, and two of the 105mm howitzers were released on the 7th of December. Those units moved to reinforce an operation in Vinh Long Province. Major Bic, the regimental commander, announced his plan to occuppy An Tuc on the 8th of December, and to protect the province and district personnel while the outpost was rebuilt in the village. The commander's original plan called for a tactical road march, with no artillery preparation.

#### 2. The Viet Cong Situation.

The 502d Battalion (VC) entered An Tuc on the 6th of December, and started to dig defensive positions. They told the villagers that the government troops had been driven away, and would not return.

On the 7th of December, the Viet Cong told the villagers that the next day would be a holiday to celebrate the liberation of the village. Two oxen were slaughtered for the event, and the Buddhist monks in the village pagoda, Chua Trapeang Trao, were ordered to prepare a feast.

The Viet Cong also continued their preparation of positions along Road 132, which led into the village from the northeast. They cleared fields of fire and overhead cover for all of their positions, and built supplementary and alternate positions for their machineguns and mortars. Their battalion had a field strength of 500 men, and was supported by a 100 man heavy weapons company, making their total field strength 600 men.

The Viet Cong had lost no men since entering the Republic of Vietnam in November, but some had been wounded in their attacks on Ba Chuc and In Tuc. The wounded were still with the battalion.

# 3. The 15th Regiment's Plan for 8 December.

At noon on the 7th of December, a villager of An Tue reported the Viet Cong preparations. The informer was able to
reveal only the location of the Viet Cong positions, and had
no information about their weapons. Major Bic, the regimental
commander, decided to revise his plan to march into the village

along Road 132.

Four approaches to An Tuc were available to the regiment (see Map "G"). Route #4 was eliminated as unsatisfactory.

Routes #2 and #3 led into the Viet Cong's ambush. Route #1 used the key terrain in the area, and the dense vegetation of Hill 253 and Hill 104 would cover any advancing units.

Major Bic decided to make his attack with a main force along Route #1, using the natural cover of the route to cover the advance. He devised a tactical cover and deception plan which sent the main attack along a covered route, and sent a supporting attack along the open routes (#2 and #3). The supporting attack would decoy the enemy into tripping his ambush before the main attack was discovered.

The deception force would consist of the 1st Company of the 3d Battalion, and the 861st Regional Forces (RF) Company. The two companies in the decoy force had a combined strength of 125 men. The rest of the 3d Battalion would make the main attack along Route #1. This unit had the 2d and 3d Companies of the battalion, the reconnaissance and mortar platoons, the 57mm recoiless rifle section, and the battalion's artillery observer. There were 235 men in the main attack. The reserves were the regiment's reconnaissance company, the 862d RF Company, and a popular forces armored car platoon. The 2d Battalion was on a divisional mission at Ba Chuc. Two

The 3d Battalion would leave Tri Ton before dawn on the 8th of December to cover their move in the darkness. The deception force would leave Tri Ton after dawn, walk into the ambush, and make the enemy commit himself.

### 4. Maneuvering for Position.

At 0200 hours on the 8th of December, the 3d Battalion moved out of Tri Ton under the concealment of darkness.

The battalion followed Route #1, and reached the base of Hill 253 at 0400 hours in the morning. At 0600 hours, the battalion had reached the summit of Hill 253. The enemy had not detected the unit's movement.

At 0600 hours, the deception force left Tri Ton. The battalion's 1st Company followed Route #3, and the 861st RF Company followed Route #2. Both companies were fully deployed to cover the widest possible area, and look like a larger force than they had available. Moving slowly, they took  $3\frac{1}{2}$  hours to reach the hamlet of Phum Thmor Loech (see Map "H"). Their movement was deliberately slow, because the main attack force had to parallel their routes along the difficult terrain of Route #1.

The main body reached Hill 104 at the same time that the decoy forces reached Phum Thmor Loech, 0930 hours. At that time, the battalion established an observation post manned by the artillery observer and secured by the battalion's reconnaissance platoon. The battalion's mortar was also set up on Hill 104.

By 1000 hours, the regiment was in position to the east of An Tuc with the 1st Company of the 3d Battalion on the right, the 861st RF Company astride Road 132, and the 3d Battalion to the left on Hill 104. The decoy forces could be seen from the enemy positions, but the battalion was undetected on Hill 104. The regiment's main attack was on the

flank of the Viet Cong ambush in An Tuc.

No activity was visible in An Tuc. An L-19 observation airplane working for the regiment made several low passes over An Tuc, but drew no fire from the Viet Cong. The aircraft observer did report that the village was almost deserted, and the villagers were gathered together eight kilometers west of the village.

#### 5. Springing the Trapy

By 1000 hours, when all of the regiment's forces were in position, the Viet Cong had not fired a shot. Although the decoy force was in the open, they were 1000 meters from the Viet Cong positions, which is too great a distance for effective rifle fire.

Lieutenant Tam, the 3d Battalion's observer, started to fire 105mm artillery into the woods beside An Tuc. At the same time, the 1st Company and the 861st Company started approaching the village. When the 1st Company was 500 meters in front of the village, Lieutenant Chi, the company commander, set up his machinegum and mortar and started to fire at the woodline. The Viet Cong battalion returned the fire and pinned the 1st Company down in the rice paddies. The 861st Company was also pinned down along Road 132.

Three mortars, 14 machineguns, and several hundred rifles were trained on the two companies by the Viet Cong. The 1st Company had been able to take cover behind a dike in the rice paddy, and the 861st Company had some cover along Road 132. The decoy force had only two killed and four wounded in the battle.

The main attack of the regiment still had not been discovered by the Viet Cong, and was approaching their position from the southeast. The main attack was about to hit the enemy flank. The Viet Cong had disclosed their positions when they opened fire on the decoy force, thinking that the decoys were the leading elements of the regiment. The enemy reserves were located on a hill called Phnom Toch, behind the battalions right flank. It was a rifle company.

6. Flank Attack.

The regiment had an airstrike on the way when the decoys were attacked at 1000 hours. Four Skyraiders flown by the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) were enroute from Soc Trang's airfield, 160 kilometers to the southeast. When the enemy disclosed his positions, Major Bic had the 3d Battalion's artillery observer place the airstrike on their positions, and ordered the 3d Battalion to attack.

Captain My, the battalion commander, left his artillery observer, and mortar and reconnaissance platoons on Hill 104. The 2d and 3d Companies moved abreast to the attack as the Skyraiders bombed and strafed the enemy. The 3d Company hit the enemy's positions and made rapid initial progress, but was halted by a determined counterattack. The 3d Company was pinned down in the enemy trenches by the 502d Battalion's reserve company. The enemy reserves never recaptured the trenches, but they let the rest of the Viet Cong escape, by pinning down the 3d Company.

The 2d Company was still able to move to the left of the 3d Company. The company attacked the enemy reserve positions on Phnom Toch. This attack took the pressure off of 3d Company

as the Viet Cong pulled in their right flank and started to withdraw. In a desperate action on Phnom Toch, the Viet Cong's reserves were able to stop 2d Company short of the crest. This let the majority of the enemy battalion escape, but the 2d Company took the crest in time to place fire on the fleeing enemy, and maintain contact.

The main part of the enemy unit escaped to the south and west, but at 1300 hours, part of their battalion established a defensive line in the southern half of An Tuc. Their position was centered around the village pagoda, Chua Trapeang Trao.

The 3d Battalion's 1st and 3d Companies were clearing the northern half of An Tuc. The 2d Company was in contact with the Viet Cong, and had taken the fewest casualties at this point in the battle. Captain My decided to have the 2d Company attack the pagoda to wipe out the last organized resistance in the village. He ordered the company to attack without air and artillery support, so the pagoda would not be destroyed.

With the battalion's 57mm recoiless rifle section supporting the attack by firing cannister shot into the pagoda,
the 2d Company captured the pagoda at 1400 hours in a flurry
of small arms fire. By 1430 hours, the company had cleared
the southern half of the village at a cost of eight men
wounded.

At 1500 hours, all of the village was in the hands of the government forces. All of the attacking units were in the village by that time, and the area was secure. They dug in with 2d Company on the south, 3d on the west, 1st on the north, and the 861st RF Company and the reconnaissance platoon on the east (see Map "I").

Over 80% of the houses in the village had been destroyed, but the pagoda was undamaged. The only villager killed in the attack was an old woman who had remained with her house. Among other things, the 2d Company captured the enemy battalions victory feast. This food was shared by the company and the villagers.

# 7. Actions of the 2d Battalion of the 15th Regiment on the Night of 8 December 1964.

The 2d Battalion had been on an operation on Nui Giai (a mountain 10 kilometers north of An Tuc) on the 8th of December, but had heard the battle at An Tuc. The regiment told the 2d Battalion that the enemy had withdrawn to the south, so the battalion sent out the normal night ambushes around the hamlet of Ba Chuc.

The 502d Battalion (VC) had circled to the west of An Tuc in the dark, and was moving northwest toward the Cambodian border. The Viet Cong battalion ran into a 20 man ambush of the 2d Battalion three kilometers south of Ba Chuc. The Viet Cong killed and captured the eighteen Vietnamese in the ambush force, but the two Americans escaped (one was severely wounded, and carried to safety by the other American). This action inflicted more casualties on the 502d Battalion (VC), and hurried their move to the safety of Cambodia.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. The situation in An Giang Province brought the 502d

Battalion into the fight for the Viet Cong side. The unit was untried in combat, but the opportunity to exploit the situation would not wait. The battalion's annihilation of the garrison at An Tuc cost them the loyalty of the villagers. That mistake cost the Viet Cong the battle on the 8th of December, since one of the villagers walked to Tri Ton to inform the regiment that an ambush was being prepared along Road 132. The Viet Cong actions did show the Vietnamese that An Giang Province was too large to handle, and the province was split into An Giang and Chau Doc Provinces in 1965.

- 2. The 9th Division's plan to catch the Viet Cong battalion on a two-day operation was not realistic. The government never had enough forces in the area to catch the Viet Cong, except through the lucky circumstances which occurred on the 8th of December. If the enemy had not chosen to fight at that time, they could have avoided contact and pressed their attacks on the government outposts without fighting a decisive battle. It was the Viet Cong's decision to fight the regiment at An Tuc which led to their defeat. The 15th Regiment just happened to be in the right place at the right time when the enemy decided to fight.
- 3. When the Headquarters Company and 3d Company of the 3d Battalion were ambushed on the afternoon of the 5th of December, they had passed through the ambush force from the rear. Both the scout dogs and the infantry failed to detect the ambush, and the companies walked into the open rice paddies at the base of Nui Koto believing that they were in a clear area. The dogs failed to detect the ambush because they were in the col-

umn and could not smell the Viet Cong. The units made the mistake of assuming that the area was clear because it was close to an outpost. Only the actions of the two company commanders after the action stated prevented a rout. The companies covered each other's withdrawl by fire, and exited from the ambush with all of their men and equipment.

- 4. During the action on the 5th of December, the artillery positioned in Tri Ton could not support the ambushed units. The artillery was firing over Nui Koto onto the reverse slope of the mountain. The artillery shells fell on the base of the mountain, or the top; but none fell on the Viet Cong. The artillerymen had assumed that they could fire on the southern slope of the mountain from the northern side. This mistake was almost fatal for the units caught in the Viet Cong's ambush. Only the fires of the infantry and cavalry units saved the elements of the 3d Battalion from destruction.
- the eight days of operations were 75 men killed and wounded.
  When the An Tuc outpost was destroyed on the 1st of December,
  35 men were killed. The 3d Battalion lost six killed and thirteen wounded. The 2d Battalion lost eighteen men on the night
  of the 8th of December, and one advisor was wounded on the same
  night. The 861st RF Company lost two men in the ambush at An
  Tuc on the 8th of December. Against this total of 75 government troops killed and wounded, the Viet Cong left 97 bodies
  in the area around An Tuc (bodies recovered by the 3d Battalion
  between the 8th of December and the 15th of December). The
  villagers of An Tuc reported that 50 to 100 Viet Cong had been

carried away by their comrades before the 3d Battalion captured the village. Later reports put the total enemy losses at 50% of the unit's personnel. Although this is an estimate, the 502d Battalion did leave Vietnam on the 9th of December; and did not return until the 20th of March 1965. The battalion was out of action for three months, rebuilding and retraining in Cambodia.

- 6. The cover and deception employed by the regiment on the 8th of December were the decisive factors in the attack on An Tuc. Combined with the fire and maneuver of the 3d Battalion, the cover and deception plan reduced the Viet Cong's numerical superiority and advantages of the choice of time and place for the battle. The failure of the Viet Cong to secure their positions with flank guards made the cover and deception plan work.
- 7. The Viet Cong ignored the key terrain features in the vicinity of An Tuc, specifically Hill 253, Hill 104, and Hill Phnom Toch. This mistake let the 3d Battalion approach the village along the axis of Hill 253 and Hill 104, and turned the flank of the Viet Cong positions. By combining the best use of terrain features with fire and maneuver, the cover and deception plan was successful.
- 8. Although the 15th Regiment violated some of the nine Principles of War in the early stages of the campaign, adherence to these principles on the 8th of December meant success for the regiment. Mass was achieved by concentrating the 2d and 3d Companies on the flank of the Viet Cong near Phnom Toch. Objective was achieved by assigning all maneuver forces to

definite courses of action with definite objectives. The Offensive was achieved by attacking a superior force. Economy of Force was achieved by using a decoy force to fix the positions of the Viet Cong without committing the full force available to the regiment. Maneuver was achieved by using the best avenues of approach into the Viet Cong positions, and by enveloping the Viet Cong's right flank. Unity of Command was achieved by using the regiment's command structure, and adding the 861st RF Company to the existing structure. Security was achieved through the use of a cover and deception plan, and by using a covered route for the main attacking force. Surprise was achieved by keeping the main attack of the 3d Battalion hidden until the last moment. Simplicity was achieved through clear objectives and simple command lines.

- 9. The 2d Company of the 3d Battalion failed to capture
  Phnom Toch in the initial attempt on the 8th of December.
  The Viet Cong were able to pull most of their unit out of
  An Tuc before the 2d Company captured the hill, and escaped
  a more serious defeat by holding Phnom Toch until the last.
- 10. The 2d Battalion of the 15th Regiment assumed that the Viet Cong battalion had moved south from An Tuc. For that reason, the battalion only sent the normal platoon size ambushes out on the night of the 8th of December. This mistake cost the 2d Battalion eighteen killed and missing men, and one wounded advisor.
- 11. The Vietnamese artillery was never very effective at any time during the campaign. On the 5th of December, the artillery could not support the operations on the south side

of Nui Koto due to the steep slopes. On the 8th of December, only one of the two 105mm howitzers in Tri Ton could fire on the enemy positions. This was rectified after the battle started, but the manuever forces had only half of the available artillery when the first shots were fired.

by fire to trip the Viet Cong ambush on the 8th of December.
Lieutenant Chi, the company commander, had his mortar and machinegun fire at the suspected ambush site; and the Viet Cong returned the fire. If the Viet Cong had waited for the 1st Company and the 861st RF Company to advance, they would have caught both companies in the open. The Viet Cong's machineguns and mortars were positioned to cover an open area in fromt of their bunkers and trenches. When the fight started, the two government companies in the ambush were not in the planned killing zone of the weapons. Failure to keep fire discipline let the ambushed units escape with light casualties.

## TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

- 1. Scout dogs must be used on the point and flanks of a moving unit, so the dogs can locate personnel who are not a part of the friendly unit. If the dogs are moving with the main body of a unit, they can not distinguish friend and foe.
- 2. Unit security cannot be relaxed in close proximity to another friendly unit. The presence of another unit does not mean that an area is clear, only that the other unit has not been shot at by anyone in the area.
- 3. Artillery fires planned on the reverse slopes of mountains may be ineffective. The only way to be sure, is to shoot the planned targets and check the results. A unit planning to operate in the mountains must make sure that its

supporting artillery units can fire on any potential enemy targets, even if the artillery has to move to cover a reverse slope.

- 4. Numerical inferiority can be overcome by an analysis of key terrain, selection of the best course of action, and vigorous execution of the plan of fire and maneuver.
- 5. In a counterinsurgency environment, a unit can never consider the last known enemy position as definitive. The insurgent characteristically covers his movements by deception and concealed movements.
- 6. Reconnaissance by fire is an effective way to fix
  the locations of enemy ambushes. When used against inexperienced troops, this is a very effective technique to make
  the enemy commit himself before the friendly unit is in a
  killing zone. This type of fire should be used to reconnoiter
  the open areas between hills and woodlines, and should be
  conducted from a covered position.

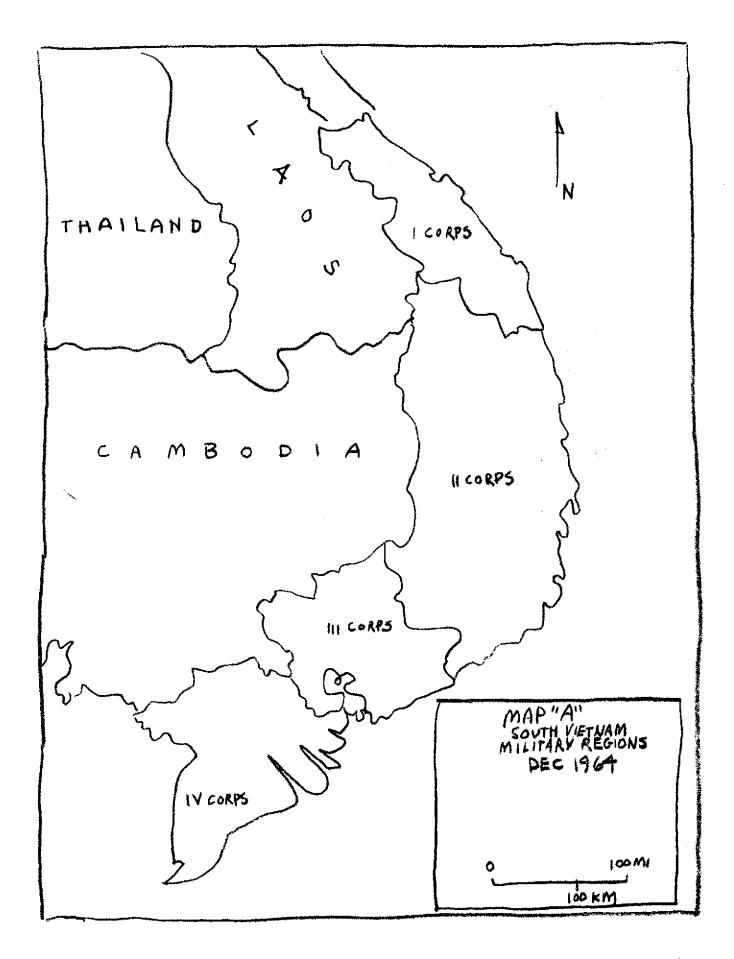
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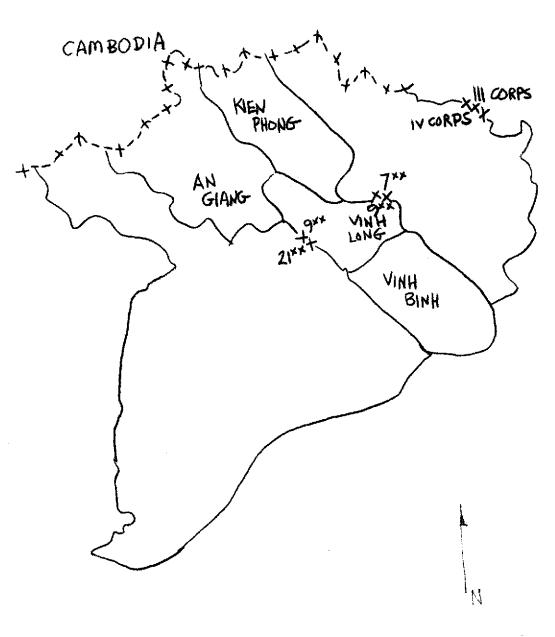
Captain, Infantry

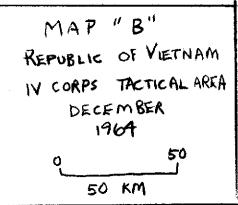
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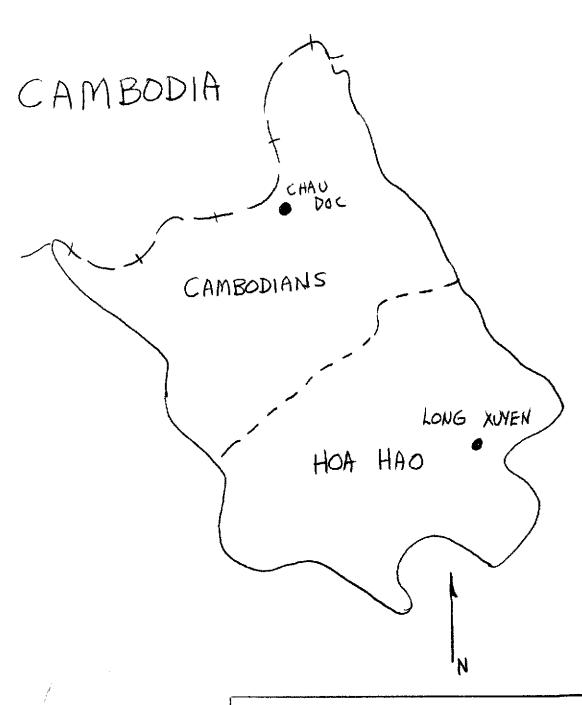
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MAP "C"

AN GIANG PROVINCE

SHOWING ETHNIC AND

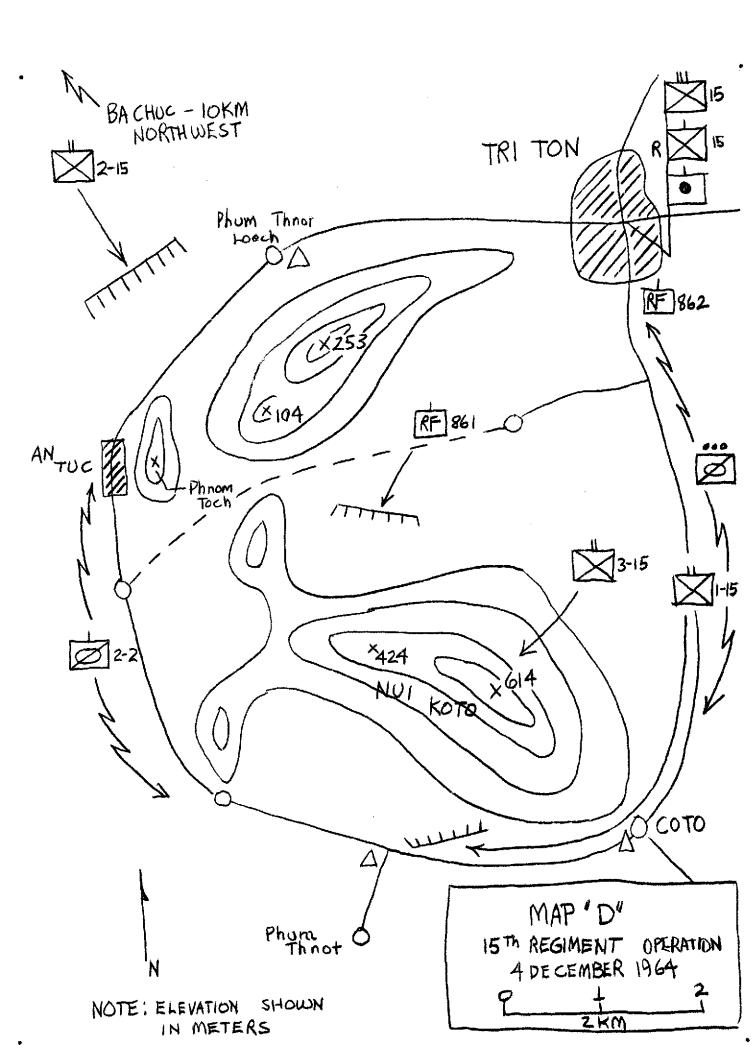
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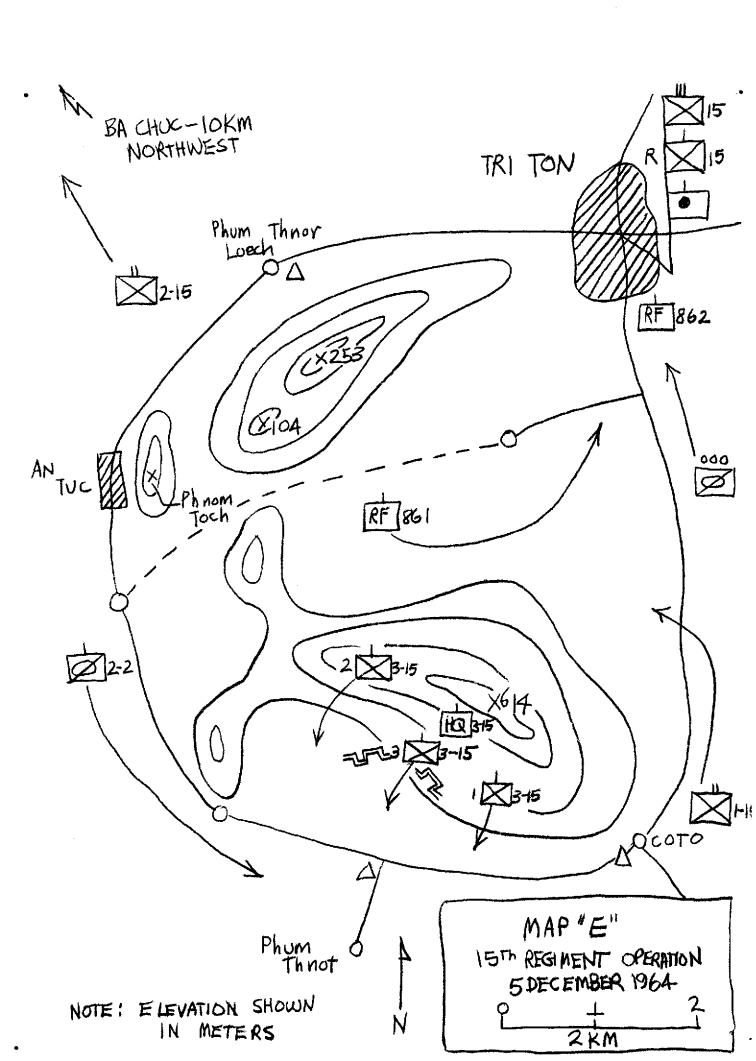
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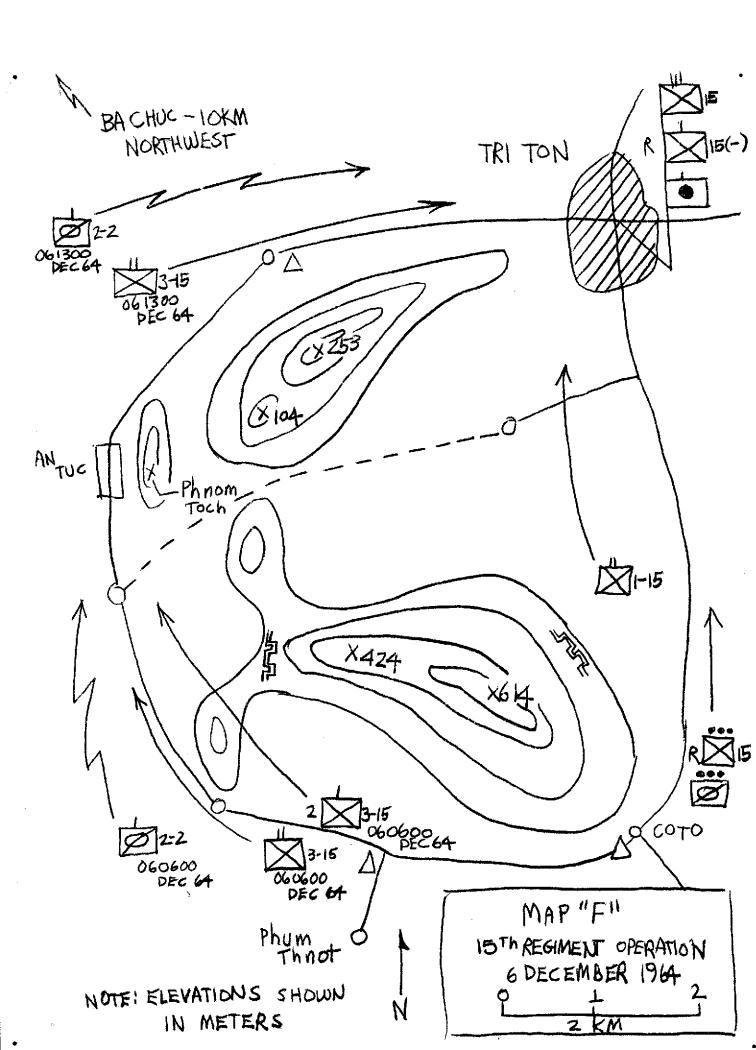
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Chua Trapeang Frao -AN TUC Phnom Toch × 104 Phum Thnor Loech 企 NU1 KOTO ×253 13 企 NOTE: ELEVATIONS IN METERS MAP "G" 15th REGIMENT OPERATION 8DECEMBER 1964 ROUTE #2 ROUTE #L TRI V TON Rout E 企 PAGODA 2 2KM

